

Drug Intelligence Brief



DRUG ENFORCEMENT ADMINISTRATION
INTELLIGENCE DIVISION

August 2003
DEA-03040

COMMON VEHICLE CONCEALMENT METHODS USED IN THE UNITED STATES

Hidden compartments have been used by smugglers since the beginning of trade and the institution of prohibitions on certain products.

Today's drug traffickers are no different from those of the past, except in the methods they employ.

Traffickers smuggling their product and/or illegal

proceeds into or through the United States use many low- and high-tech methods to conceal both their intent and their contraband from law enforcement authorities. Drug traffickers use various types of vehicles to conceal their contraband ranging from nondescript cars, commercial trucks, vans, and tractor-trailers, to the popular minivans driven by "soccer moms."



How and where drugs are concealed is determined by a variety of factors that include, but are not limited to: the drugs themselves; the size of the vehicle; the final destination of the drugs (i.e., travel distance involved); law enforcement's awareness of current concealment methods; and the imagination of the traffickers and/or the fabricators of the concealed traps themselves. For example, until recently, traffickers moving drugs and currency over long distances within the country preferred the use of the Ford Windstar minivan. Windstars were very popular family vans and could accommodate as many as 10 individual traps. According to current DEA information, traffickers have supplanted their use of Windstars as their use has been compromised and identified by law enforcement.

Possession of hidden compartments or "automotive safes," as they are known in commercial parlance, is not illegal in most states.¹ Hidden compartments are illegal in

¹ Although concealed traps may be referred to as "automotive safes," there are legitimate businesses which manufacture and advertise security safes, ostensibly used to secure valuables and weapons in vehicles, and refer to them as automotive safes. These differ from traps in that they are usually mini-safes with combination or key locks which are permanently installed in vehicles, but are not usually concealed. Some of these safes may feature an additional "lock and carry" feature where they can be secured to a permanently-installed "docking device" located in the vehicle while the vehicle is occupied, but removed when the vehicle is left unattended.

only a handful of states to include California, Illinois, and Michigan.² Penalties for possession of illegal traps vary from seizure of the vehicle in Illinois, to jail or prison time not to exceed 1 year in California. Conversely, trap fabricators in California, “shall be punished by imprisonment in the state prison for 16 months or from 2 to 3 years.” There are several companies throughout the United States that are known to install traps and that are recognized by traffickers, one of which is a company called Ultrasmith.³ However, in addition to such specialty shops, traps are being crafted in auto body shops, machine shops, welding shops, and stereo installation shops.

In addition to using various concealment methods to smuggle drugs into and throughout the United States, many polydrug smuggling organizations are believed to also be trafficking in human cargo. More sobering, it is not unreasonable to infer that these same routes and methods could be used to smuggle terrorists and their implements of terror into the United States. That the smuggler’s art, to include methods and means, has survived generations, lends credence to the notion that traffickers tend to adhere with what works. Nevertheless, drug traffickers are constantly on the alert for indications that law enforcement is becoming aware of their techniques. Routes, conveyances, and concealment methods are continuously updated and subject to change.

Following the tragic events of September 11, 2001, drug traffickers have not significantly altered their use of concealment methods and use of traps. However, traffickers have made allowances for increased airport security by scaling back their routing of drugs and currency through airports and have instead redirected drug shipments over the nation’s highways and byways.

Traffickers’ use of traps as a vehicle concealment method is based on the type of load and the distance of travel. These traps can generally be placed into three broad categories: small, medium, and large.

Small Traps

Intermediate and low-level suppliers use small traps to move small amounts of drugs, usually less than 3 kilograms, short distances; that is, across cities or between nearby urban areas such as New York City and Newark, New Jersey. Traps of this size are also used to facilitate local deliveries. For example, the DEA New York Field Division (NYFD) has identified several groups of Dominican traffickers using Lincoln Towncars with livery tags to deliver drug orders to customers who have placed orders from bars and hotels.

Small traps are generally the most technologically sophisticated, with many requiring complex sequences of dashboard buttons and switches manipulated to access or close concealed compartments. Some compartment doors are operated by

² Michigan state law does not specifically prohibit automotive safes or hidden compartments, but does outlaw them under the definition of drug paraphernalia, “A device commonly known as an automotive safe, that is specifically designed to carry and conceal a controlled substance in an automobile, includes, but is not limited to a can used for brake fluid, oil, or carburetor cleaner which contains a compartment for carrying and concealing controlled substances.”

³ Ultrasmith is a New York-based company that specializes in automotive customization to include, but not limited to, luxury interior upgrades, performance enhancements, and vehicle armoring.

electrically-operated pistons; others may have mechanical or magnetic latches that are released only when the proper sequence is entered or after a small magnet has been passed over them. Other small traps may consist of manually and electrically operated drawers fabricated into and/or under seats; in both center- and overhead-consoles; and behind air-conditioning vents. A number of inconspicuous original equipment manufacture traps are being identified: natural voids under center-consoles; under change mats; and in or under areas used to store audio tapes and compact disks.

A difficulty in identifying these traps is that they often exhibit no signs of alteration and, therefore, may be overlooked by law enforcement officers during the course of a routine search at the scene of a traffic stop. Many traps are only found upon a destructive search or by technical personnel. Which traps are employed and where they can be found is dependent upon the type of vehicle; however, a common small trap location is in the passenger airbag space, usually located above the glove box or on top of the dashboard. The size of the vehicle is not necessarily representative of the size of the trap being employed; however, larger vehicles have more natural voids, thereby allowing traffickers to employ more traps than in smaller vehicles.

Small traps are also used to conceal weapons. When the traps are used for this purpose, they are usually easily accessible and within reach of the driver or, in the case of someone being chauffeured, within easy reach of that person whether they are in the front or back seat. There have been numerous reported instances where law enforcement personnel have witnessed suspects entering vehicles with weapons in their hands, but have been unable to locate the weapons after the vehicle was stopped. Traps used for weapons concealment may be found in the passenger airbag compartment; in the doors; in seatbacks; in center-consoles; and under the carpeting at the driver's feet.



Trap found in an automobile passenger airbag space



Floor-plate trap in the closed and open position

Medium Traps

Traffickers employing medium-sized traps typically use them to transport and deliver 25 to 50 kilogram loads over intermediate distances, that is, intrastate deliveries. They may also be used to convey drugs and other contraband over longer distances encompassing hundreds of miles and crossing multiple state lines.

For example, medium-sized traps may be employed to move drugs from Tucson, Arizona to Chicago, Illinois. Medium-sized traps are generally less technically sophisticated than small traps, but may be very innovative in their placement and concealment. As the loads are being transported over relatively long distances, the drugs may be dispersed throughout various compartments in the vehicle which are inaccessible to the vehicle's occupants. In fact, the occupants may be unaware of the location or amount of the drugs they are delivering.

Medium-sized traps often make use of natural voids found behind the dashboard; between body panels and the frame of the vehicle; the frame of the vehicle itself; inside doors; inside the fuel tank(s); throughout the engine compartment; and inside vehicle batteries. The location and size of these compartments is restricted only by the size of the vehicle and the fabricator's imagination.



Welded compartment discovered in the rear of a minivan

Large Traps

Large-scale traffickers along the Southwest Border frequently use tractor-trailers and refrigerated utility trailers to transport loads through the ports-of-entry (POEs). This is probably the most secure and efficient way to transport large amounts of marijuana, which can be concealed within loads of legitimate agricultural products. Large traps are most often used to convey large quantities, hundreds of pounds to metric tons, of drugs and currency across borders and long distances. These traps are generally the least technically sophisticated and may consist of false compartments welded into, onto, or alongside standard vehicle equipment. For example, in April 2003, Bureau of Customs



Tank car with false compartments on ends



Marijuana stored in hidden compartment in floor of a semi-trailer

and Border Protection (CBP) agents located 981 pounds of marijuana secreted in a crane counterweight being transported through the checkpoint near Falfurrias, Texas. The trap was located after a drug-detection canine alert, and because the traffickers had over-applied the “make-up” grease and dirt used to hide the weld marks and fresh paint. Traffickers



Marijuana seizure found in a crane counterweight

employing large traps may use any type of vehicle, depending upon the amount of drugs being transported and the destination. Large traps have been found in, but are not limited to, the tractors and trailers of over-the-road semis; busses; railroad box- and tank-cars; and sport utility vehicles (SUVs). For example, on February 8, 2003, United States Customs Service (USCS) officers searched a railroad tank-car entering the United States. Gamma-ray scanning revealed secret compartments at both ends of the car. Further inspection of the car resulted in the seizure of 173 packages of marijuana, totaling 2,551 pounds. Investigative follow-up resulted in the identification of another rail car—which had already crossed into the United States—in transit to New Jersey. DEA special agents in Newark intercepted the second rail car and discovered another 1,741 pounds of marijuana concealed in secret compartments.

Trends

In the Spring of 2002, USCS agents discovered an interesting method of concealment at the Deconcini POE in Nogales, Arizona, where 14.7 pounds of marijuana were seized from a Mexican-registered Dodge Caravan. The packages of marijuana were wrapped in cotton and placed in a sealed rectangular mold made of a honey and wax mixture. The mold was then placed in a hidden compartment located in the dash of the vehicle. The marijuana was not detectable by USCS drug-detection canines. This concealment method has allegedly been used at other POEs in Arizona, as well as in California. The drivers are reportedly Mexican citizens residing in Tijuana. Intelligence information indicates that, although this concealment method is usually employed by cocaine smugglers, test runs are being conducted with small loads of marijuana.⁴

The Nogales Resident Office has reported that the use of SUVs to transport drugs had become extremely popular during Fiscal Year 2002. Recovered SUVs have been found to contain sophisticated built-in compartments, and appear to be replacing both tractor-trailers and personally owned sedans as conveyance vehicles in the Nogales area.⁵

⁴ Source information derived from DEA Phoenix Field Division 3rd quarter, FY 2002, Quarterly Trends in Trafficking Report

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According to a Special Agent in the DEA NYFD, Unified Intelligence Group (UIG), “As trafficking groups move. . . their tried and trusted concealment techniques move with them.” Concealment techniques identified with Dominican trafficking groups in the Northeast are now popping up in the Midwestern and Western States as these groups migrate westward. Likewise, concealment techniques and vehicles commonly associated with Mexican trafficking groups throughout the Southwest and Midwest are now being encountered in Eastern States.

Conclusions

Traffickers’ use of traps will continue. Additionally, they will continue to adapt and use different vehicles, more sophisticated traps, and concealment locations in an attempt to change their profiles and in response to law enforcement’s identification and targeting of favorite vehicles. Consumer interest in large four-wheel-drive and other off-road vehicles, increases trafficker access to these vehicles. The size and ubiquitous presence of modern SUVs afford traffickers the option of scaling down their use of commercial trucks—which are subject to greater scrutiny on America’s highways. New and even more sophisticated traps are virtually assured as various associated technologies, such as miniaturization, are refined. The miniaturization of trap components, such as electric motors, actuators, and hydraulic pistons, will allow fabricators to place traps in areas previously denied due to size constraints.

Law enforcement personnel must continue to be knowledgeable of vehicle concealment methods and techniques used by traffickers to combat their attempts to conceal drugs and their illegal proceeds. In addition, they must be as imaginative in their searches as the traffickers and fabricators are in their placement of the traps. Small traps, commonly used for drug deliveries or weapons storage, are generally within easy access of the driver or chauffeured passengers. Medium traps often make use of natural voids in vehicles or convoluted compartments, and the contraband may be inaccessible to the occupants of the vehicle. In large traps, the contraband is generally secreted in compartments or additions fabricated into or welded onto the smuggler’s conveyance of choice.

This brief is not intended to be an all-inclusive guide to concealed traps in vehicles, but rather a general source of information for those working in offices not located along the Southwest border, nor along major interstate routes where Operation CONVOY or PIPELINE stops are frequently conducted. The authoritative sources for information on commonly encountered vehicular concealment methods are the Domestic and Operation PIPELINE units at the El Paso Intelligence Center and the UIG.